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ABSTRACT

As a tool for composition classes, practice in letter writing can help create a community of discourse. Many issues can be touched on in a discussion on the role of letters in society: the value of letters to historians and biographers; note passing in elementary and secondary school; personal use; letter columns in the newspapers and magazines; and letters of complaint, recommendations, applications, inquiry, order, or explaining. Letter writing can have numerous advantages, such as enabling the writer to write people they might not call or helping a person write something very sensitive that is difficult to communicate in speech. Focus on letter writing in class reveals the appeals and necessities of written language to the community of self and the larger society. Also, practice in communication through writing letters of various kinds seems to have a beneficial effect on other writing. (MS)

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Letters: Value to Self and Society

Elizabeth Wahlquist

I use letters rather extensively in my composition classes at all levels. I use them some in all classes. Different activities fit at different times. But I keep as much focus on the letters as I can.

On the first day I show the AT&T ad, "If Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning had AT&T's discounts, it would have been a terrible loss for English literature. "We talk about what might be lost by so much being done over the phone now. Students are interested that even AT&T, in this competitive time for them, isn't saying everything should be communicated over the phone. (At least that is the way we interpret it, and AT&T didn't object when I told them how I wanted to use the ad.) Few want to give up the phone. I don't either. My telephone bills can get close to $100; but I also feel that I keep the postoffice in business. Even those who write few letters, agree in principle. (The AT&T ad is in your handout.)

Most letters are written to one person, to an audience of one. It does take two for letters to exist, even if one of the two is yourself. The rhetorical situation of speaker/writer, audience, subject produces writing that does communicate. It is discourse of importance to the self and the society. "A letter lives only because someone wrote it for someone else to read." Byron said, "It is the only device for combining solitude and good company." We talk about the communication and the solitude.

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We usually write letters alone, but we are thinking about someone else, and we can think. On the phone, there is the sound of the individual's literal voice, immediacy; but the solitude is gone. And the one on the other end will respond immediately to what is said without the benefit of any solitude.

We discuss how young children have a desire to write even before they have a desire to read. Part of it is the actual implement involved: pencil, pen, crayon, typewriter, even word processor. Part of it is just the delight in communication. Children playing with the writing of notes and letters is explored. I tell them about one of my niece's favorite games when she was about first through fourth grades, when she didn't like school at all--still doesn't much. It was mostly writing letters. A favorite situation was at a hospital; her father and mother had been in hospitals several times. We used two old typewriters. One would write complaining of not enough humorous cards in the gift shop. The other would write a note back saying that it had been taken care of, thanking the sender for the letter. One would write about needing a repairman to fix the television in Room 293. The other would write about getting it fixed or asking for more information or suggesting a new set because that one was beyond repair. Another would complain about the wilted roses bought in the florist shop. Another would apologize, saying it would not happen again. It sometimes went on for three hours. The students usually have similar stories. Young people were communicating; the actual writing made a

communication and stimulated the writing to continue. Creativity kept it going.

We talk about note passing in elementary and secondary school. Why do children do it? Most of the time they will see the person outside of class in a very few minutes. Part of it is the opportunity to single out someone to receive the note. Part of it is the hope of receiving a note in return. Part of the pleasure is that someone went to the effort to write it and pass it to me--even with the danger of the teacher or someone else intercepting it. The sender may even hope that someone else intercepts it. Sometimes the notes are sent because the person doesn't quite have the courage to talk to the other person. We usually decide the teacher shouldn't openly encourage these notes, but she might look the other way and not pick the notes up unless it became a real problem. That it is forbidden is appealing. The note may also be shared with a close friend, bragging about receiving a note. It may be tucked away in a box or stuck in a journal that night. Writing is writing. Recognize the irony of condemning the note passing and complaining about the unwritten assigned essay.

Often we write a note because someone has done something well, or looked nice, or been kind. We may tell her so right now, but still write a note later about it. (Of course, sometimes we just think about writing the note, but never get it done.) We tell them again so they have it in a more permanent form, so they know we really mean it. We didn't just say it

right after the talk because everyone was doing it, because we wanted to be seen complimenting her. We do it again in the privacy of a note; this is just for you. There is the added compliment that we took the time to do it. Most letters convey that kind of compliment. There is something on the paper they can keep as a tangible evidence of someone enjoying what they did.

It's possible we have something we strongly feel needs to be said, so we write a note. If we tried to say it to the person face to face, he might not let us finish. He would interrupt. It is harder to turn the letter off; letters can tell us things we need to be told, but things we wouldn't let anyone tell us to our faces.

When it is something very serious and we want to be sure to get it right, we write it. We may even know the person will be upset. There will be time before we see each other for him to calm down and realize the good intentions and maybe that it was right. We may want it written so it can be re-read and thought about.

We can take hearing about some problems, worries, and unpleasantness differently in a letter, particularly one that has taken at least a day or two to arrive. We know it may have already been worked out or taken care of; the crisis could be over by now. Keep calm.

Students tell about leaving notes for parents about where they have gone or what time to get them up in the morning, and

the tendency to personalize them, to have fun with the parents or to be a little bit smart. They tell of receiving notes on particular days like birthdays or when they had to do a presentation. We share experiences of notes left by roommates, friends, family, classmates--in the school locker, on the bed, taped to the mirror, on a pile of books in the library, on my desk. We read W. C. Williams'

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

the note left on the refrigerator, apologizing for something he isn't really sorry for, to someone he knows will forgive him. The love and understanding are in the tone of the poem. The enjoyment of the plums is in the poem. We read some that grade school children wrote, like this one from Kenneth Koch's Rose, Where Did You Get That Red.

Dear Cat

Please

for
give
me
for
watching
eyes
gleam
in
the
night.

Some try their hand at some poem notes.

This Is Just To Say

Please
for
give
me
for
knowing
and
using
your
books
but
they
were
right
there
and
so
much
fun.

I've seen many variations of the card, "I'm sending you this card so you'll think of me at least once today."

Students share with us their current experiences with notes for others and the warmth in their homes and apartments as someone is pleased and reciprocates. I end up with lots of notes, some anonymous, when I leave my office open.

We comment that adults often pass notes, during meetings, in church. Sometimes it's because they are bored or sleepy. The activity of the notes is needed. Sometimes it's the communication compulsion to communicate with someone, something they have just thought of. Sometimes it is the compulsion to be more involved and communicating, not just to be the passive listener. It can't wait.

The value of old letters comes up. I make sure it does. It isn't just that we can get real pleasure out of reading letters parents have saved from when we were away from home the first time, or letters of advice from a parent to a child, or letters from mother to father when they were in first love. Letters have always been very valuable to historians and biographers. I tell them the story of the Lyman Letters of the Dickinson family: Richard Sewell recounts:

> In the spring of 1961, Joseph Bardwell Lyman III, then a senior at Yale, stopped me on the street one day to inquire about my work on Emily Dickinson and to ask if I would be interested in seeing some boxes of old letters, journals, and memorabilia that had come down from the first Joseph Bardwell Lyman, who had known the Dickinson family of Amherst.
>
> My response cannot be imagined. Soon the boxes were in my office and during the next few months there was scarcely a day without a significant discovery--the most exciting (the 'snatches' Joseph copied from Emily's letters to him) coming climactically, as it should, at the very end of the search. And so, thanks to a student's alertness and to the generosity of his father, we have this entirely new study of the Dickinsons (especially Emily's sister Lavinia), this new insight into the Dickinson home during Emily's formative years, and this important addition to the Emily Dickinson cannon.

Published collections of letters are looked for and browsed in and read. Some explored this semester already are: Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, E. B. White, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, Sylvia Plath, Charles Lamb, James Agee, William Faulkner, Dorothy Wordsworth. The students share some experiences and findings with the others. Some unenthusiastic readers were surprised how much they enjoyed them and wondered if they should start telling friends and family to save their letters in case they become famous. A few comment they would have to write some first.

We wonder what historians and biographers are going to do in the future without these letters. I give them a 1987 Time essay, "History Without Letters," (In your handout) Watergate tapes and computer disks don't seem to have quite the potential. (Unless there are letters on those disks. Many people I know do write their letters on the word processor so have all their letters.) I point out how important this may make their journals which our students are all encouraged to keep. I particularly like the ending of the essay.

> Then again, preserving such a record may not be worth the vast effort, expense of constraints involved. After all, only history is at stake. But if top officials knew in the back of their minds that future generations were listening in, it might have a salutary effect on the present. Had judgment of history been hovering over their shoulders, the architectects of the Iran-contra affair, for example, might have reflected a moment longer on the long term implications of their actions. Indeed, the dulling of our historical sense could be one reason the U.S. needs so many special prosecutors these days.

I tell them how important writing letters is to me, sometimes summarizing to them the letters I've just written or received. I do write many letters to family and friends. I do not want to lose touch with them. There are things I explore with them that I wouldn't get over the phone. Not all of them would I call. We keep in touch through letters, (Right now I am behind.) I would never get them written if I proofread, revised, rewrote. I would never be satisfied. I'd always find something wrong or something I wanted to change, say differently. So I just don't. There is a risk, but my friends and family want to hear from me. The ones I write to want my letters enough to put up with a few problems; it usually fits my voice, and many of the errors are revealing, probably Freudian. And they enjoy those. I use that to help point out how one of the most important things to find out is when to stop. Many revise all the freshness and spontaneity out of their writing. Is that or correctness more important? We talk about priorities. When we are comfortable in the community in which we are trying to communicate, whether it be to one or to the whole community, we write more effectively, and even more correctly. The focus on the correctness does not bring correctness. The focus on the communication helps in the communicating, but it also helps in the correctness.

I share with them my experience of writing at least two papers/talks and one introduction of a speaker from journal entries and letters sent home from summer school with SAVE written all over the letters. The five summers when I heard

Robert Frost a number of times provided enough journal and letter writing material that I gave a talk on Frost and one of Frost and Dickinson. I was surprised when I had so much there for the first one. I was amazed when I had enough there for the second one.

I require letters in the three Independent Study Courses I teach. (Correspondence Courses) In the course, Writing Your personal History, I have something involving letter writing every lesson. It is partly to make them aware of how valuable journals and letters can be when it comes to writing about ourselves and our families. It might be a letter to me, which I answer. It might be to enclose an excerpt from a letter from someone else. It might be an excerpt of theirs to someone. It means they have to write a letter and even somehow motivate someone to write a letter to them. It might be an exploration of the joys, trials, satisfactions, value of letter writing.

A student, whose lessons have been a delight to read and who is almost at the end of the course, recently wrote:

> I am the most faithful letter writer in my family. If it were not for my letters, my family and I would only communicate about once a month by phone. Even now it takes about three letters from me to make them feel guilty enough to write one. And certain members of my family never write; they let their wives and husbands do it for them. I write letters to cheer my friends and family up, to give them support and advice and encouragement. I write letters to cheer myself up by bringing my far away, loved ones closer to me. I do not want to lose touch with them or miss sharing what I am experiencing. Sometimes I get creative in my letter writing. I am going to send them the two versions about Myrtle Beach that I did for a past lesson when we had to write it once in first person and once in third person. Their response will show even more how my choice of first person for my personal history was the right one. They will

be puzzled by the one with "she," wondering why I would ever talk about it that way. Sometimes when I know a family member is experiencing a bad time, I send a poem or a short essay about what that person means to me. About a year ago when my dad was going through a difficult time, through bankruptcy, I sent him a letter about my favorite memories of him. (Included in handout)

I save many of the letters that people send me. Usually I choose special, different, humorous ones to save. I am saving them because I cannot help thinking that if the person dies, I would not have anything to remember her by. I dream of one day showing my children letters from my grandmother and saying,

'This is what your great-grandmother was like.'

Stories, poems, epistolary novels go way back . . . The students hunt out some and read. Why did they write that way? It's the potential for the revelation of character, for getting a narrator close to the reader. It adds to a credibility that this is really going on; it isn't just made up. It's the trust between the writer and reader of a letter. So far this semester the following are some of the ones read:

The Color Purple	Alice Walker
Letters to Alice	Faye Weldon
Daddy Long Legs	Jean Webster
Alexander Botts and the Earthworm tractor stories	William Hazlett Upson
Letters to Father Christmas	Tolkein
The Jolly Postman	David Brin
Where's Waldo	Martin Handford
Long Distances	Fabienne Marsh

Some of these are short or children's, but that's fine with me.

You know there are many more. I haven't mentioned any well-known classics of the epistolary novel. Some of those are too much to add to what we already have to do in the course.

We read the letter columns in the newspapers and magazines: Letter to the Editor, Dear Abby, Ann Landers, Doctor Solomon, Heloise, Letters to Judy Blume, Letters from Pet Owners, etc. What is the appeal to write them? What is the appeal to read them? We come up with basic need to communicate, the sharing of problems and ideas, the knowing others often have problems too and sometimes worse, the trust and self-revelation, our desire to empathize. They write letters of this kind . . . Some even decide to mail them. The only publications that I know of resulting is in the university letters to the editor.

The kinds of necessary letters we all have to write are explored: letters of complaint, recommendations, applications, letter of inquiry, ordering, explaining. Each student writes one of their choice, as close as possible to something they might really need to write. I have had them write the letter of recommendation they might need written for themselves for a job or award or acceptance into a program. (One of our faculty members has a student who asks for a letter of recommendation, write what he would actually need or like in the letter and what he hoped the professor would write. It was intended as a way to get the information that the faculty member needed to write his letter.) I see it as very worthwhile for the student.

The informal letter, which isn't limited by usual strictures for form and language, surprisingly often finds a more meaningful form and language than the formal writing assignments do. It gives opportunities of communication and self-expression that we all need. We read Garrison Keillor's article on how to write a personal letter. He says the shy person needs to write letters or she will dry up and blow away. He says we need to get mail that is not a bill. He says we need to write or no one will know we are alive. He speaks of letters being gifts, not something we owe. And we respond as we do to gifts. He reminds us that a letter is to someone who already cares about us for some other reason than our brilliance. He says we should know something when we sign "Yours Ever," that we didn't know when we wrote "Dear Pal." He says it is a way of picking up the phone and calling the future. We can't do it with a phone; but we can do it with a letter. (Article in your handout)

My students write letters to me. (I could say every week which is what I would like, but I am sometimes not able to do it that often.) Sometimes I suggest topics; at the beginning an introduction of the writer. I may suggest topics related to our reading, to our forum speaker, to our more formal writing assignments, to what is current on campus. But they can write about anything they want. I put the burden on the student to say something. I answer the letters. Yes, it takes time, but not as much as you might think. But I say little except when they have said something I can respond to, answer questions. I respond to

what they have written. If they write a very blah letter, they get a very blah letter. If it is only generalities, they get only generalities. I admit to them that in usual letter writing the burden should be more equally shared. But in their letter writing to me, the burden is on them. If they comment on something they have read, I can respond. If they criticize an assignment, I can defend or admit its problems. Sometimes I can suggest areas that are good potential for more formal writing. If they really don't say anything neither do I. Letters get better, often longer. Seldom do they make mechanical errors, at least not serious ones. They relax; they write what they know how to say. I do not grade them. But the writing is often much better than much of the writing I do grade. It's partly freedom from grades that produces the better writing. Gradually there does seem to be a carry over into other writing.

Occasionally I write a group answer, but I don't like to. I write better one-on-one letters than I do to-the-group letters. I think it's because their letters are individual. In class I can respond to the whole group because they do have a community identity. They are more of a one. But in their letters they are individuals. (There are samples of a group letter and the cycle of individual letters in the handout.)

The weeks I don't ask for a letter to me, I have them turn in a letter to someone else-addressed, stamped, return name and address. I check them off and mail them. I have yet to receive a letter from the receiver thanking me for promoting a letter;

but one of the graduate students who is doing a better job with some of my ideas than I am, has.

Several times a semester I have each student pick a recent paper that they are fairly pleased with and make a copy to send to someone who will appreciate it. I suggest a cover letter explaining what is going on. A few times I have asked to read the cover letter but not usually. I do ask them to turn in a brief explanation of why they chose that paper to send to that particular person.

With our reading assignments, like the required novel in Freshman English right now, Pride and Prejudice, I have them write a long letter, at least 5 pages, related to the reading of the book. I give them several chapters from Faye Weldon's Letters to Alice. They are fictional letters from a writer aunt to her young niece about her reading of Jane Austen. It talks about a younger generation reading a book of an older generation, filling in cultural background that will help in the reading and understanding. It talks about the art of reading and relating fictional works in some way to our own lives. They are to read some of the novel first; then decide to whom they want to write and why. One may choose to write to a younger friend or brother or sister, telling them about ~~the~~ and preparing them for a book they will probably have to read sometime. It may be a mother who is complimented on not being Mrs. Bennet. It may be commiserating with a good friend about a Collins in her life. It may be joining the feminists about women in that time, it may be a

fellow "soaps" watcher about how the novel is alike and different form the "soaps." Many do mail these letters but it is not required. At the end of the work there is a department essay exam on the novel. In many instances the letters are much better papers than the papers are. (sample in handout)

The more I've included the letter writing in my composition classes, the more we have seemed to enjoy it. I'm not opposed to students enjoying what we are doing. A great deal more gets written. The kinds of writing required in an academic setting improve too, not just the letters. Some say they are more observant and more understanding through the focus on letter writing. Some say they are more honest and sincere in their relationships in and out of the letters. Some say that through letter writing they are even better people.

ABSTRACT

Letters: Value to Self and Society

In an attempt to create a community of discourse within our class and beyond, I focus on letters. I begin with AT&T's "If Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning had AT&T's discounts, it would have been a terrible loss for English literature." We discuss the value of letters to historians and biographers. We share experiences of finding old letters. We find novels and poems written in letters. All of this is treated in the context of our technological world of telephones and word processors.

We read letter columns like Anne Landers, exploring the appeal and writing one. We explore letters we may have to write like letters of application.

Each writes weekly letters to me. I respond, either in an individual letter or a group one. Each writes a letter to someone else and I mail it. For some assignments each turns in two copies and a cover letter, and one is mailed to someone the student feels will appreciate it. The letters are quite free from mechanical errors because they write what they know how to say, and they are not graded. We talk about that. Through the letters they build confidence and trust which carries over to other writing. They see me writing and some of my writing. Some of the mystery and fear goes.

We discuss how we write people we might not call, or write something very sensitive to get it right.We talk about how it is nice to have some things written to reread. We appreciate that someone cared enough to write. We even talk about the appeal to a child to write notes and receive notes. We talk about notes to ourselves.

This focus on letter writing reveals the appeals and necessities of written language to the community of self and the larger society.